

The Great Commission

Genesis 1:1-2:4a / Psalm 8 / 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
/ Matthew 28:16-20

St. George's Anglican Church, Ottawa, ON

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

Trinity Sunday Year A, May 18, 2008

Matthew 28.16-20 The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

There can be no greater text to preach on to the community gathered together in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, than the one we have heard read in the Gospel. For in it we members of that community hear again what it is we are to be about as a community.

For in the Gospel reading for today, we hear nothing less than the first words spoken to the first witnesses to the new creation, found there in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, the scene is not promising. True, the 11 disciples -- the 12 minus Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus -- had come, as Jesus had commanded them,¹ to a mountain in Galilee. But they came confused, lost, sad. Some even doubted what they had seen with their eyes or been told.

It's not surprising, though, is it? After all, we have heard throughout the Easter season readings of how difficult it was to believe. Mary, who met the risen Jesus at the tomb, didn't recognize him. The 2 disciples walking on the Emmaus Road didn't recognize Jesus when he came to them. Other apostles, like Thomas, doubted at some point that Jesus could possibly have been raised from the dead.

So, these 11, like all of Jesus' followers, are not a promising beginning, yet they are the ones to whom Jesus speaks with the full authority of God: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." In other words, Jesus says, 'What I am about to tell you comes with the full authority of the One who created the heavens and the earth, the One who spoke and the world came into being. He has now entrusted all His authority to His Son. And He has given me a charge for you.'

The One who spoke and the world came into being is the One who gave a mandate to the first humans He made when He said to them -- "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion" (Genesis 1.28).

Now, that One has given authority to His Son to give a new mandate to these 11 who are witnesses of the first-fruits of a new creation, Jesus, raised from the dead. Unlike any element of creation, the risen Jesus will never die, will never grow old and decay. It is the start of a new creation. And so to these first witnesses of a new creation, Jesus gives a mandate even as God had given a mandate to the first humans.

¹ Cf Matt 26:32

But, that mandate is not: ‘Go back to your homes. Find your wives and have lots of children. Be fruitful and multiply. Peter, James and John: catch lots of fish. Levi: collect lots of taxes. Make lots of money; be prosperous and enjoy creation.’

No. The mandate of the new creation is different: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (28:19). Or in better English: Go, and make students from every land. Create a school.

It’s a bit anti-climactic isn’t it? Genesis is such a powerful story, as God charges Adam and Eve with populating the earth and conquering it. Jesus’ words to the 11 are about ... creating a school?

It sounds odd, but that’s exactly what Jesus says. The new creation will take shape in a school. And here we are this morning, in that school of Christ, gathered, and ready to learn. A new creation taking shape even as we speak.

Jesus tells the 11 how that school is to take shape: ‘Your mandate is to go forth and make students and here’s how you will do it: first, you will baptize them, and then you will teach them.’

Now you have to realize that this must have sounded very odd to the 11. Because what Jesus says to them is actually: first you will drown them, and then you will teach them.

That’s right: the word “baptize” is a Greek word that we have simply borrowed into English. What it actually means is: to drown. It was used of sailors falling from ships into the sea, or of villages washed away by flood waters. The word would be used to describe the fears of the Chinese people living in villages threatened by breaking dams after the earthquake. So, yes, it implies drowning!

But, this seems like an odd beginning for the school of Christ. One of the 11 might easily have stopped Jesus at this point and said: “Hmm, excuse me, sir, there’s a problem here! Uhm, if we drown them, there won’t be anyone left to teach!”

But that’s the point: we are not teaching members of the old creation, but members of the new creation. Baptism, or drowning, symbolizes that what is part of the first creation (which all dies not because it was intended by God to die but because the sin of man pervades it) must first indeed die before it can become a new creation. This is why Paul wrote to the Romans: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

Our practice of baptism is a symbol of how what is part of the old creation can become part of the new: it must die. A sailor falls off the ship into the cold waters of the Mediterranean and dies. The whole creation was baptized, drowned, in the flood of Noah.

But...

But, God by his mercy and grace, will bring His new creation forth from those waters. He will snatch you out of death’s jaws at the last moment. No, you will die to this world. But, you will come forth from the waters. And when you do, you will be a new person. You don’t get saved from the cold waters; you die in them. But, God, by his mercy, raises you from that death and makes the risen you a part of His new creation by taking you into His school where you will be taught “to observe all that I [Jesus] have commanded you” (28:19).

What is that? You will be taught all that Jesus Himself has been entrusted with by the Father. And as the beloved Son, there is very little that Jesus has not been told. True, He has not been told when the End is to come: no one knows that, not even the Son, only the Father.

But, the Father has shared with the Son the truth about God, about our world, about ourselves, about history, truth that often lies hidden behind a veil of lies or illusion. You will be taught that in the new creation school.

The Son knows what it is to be in a relationship with the Father. That, too, you will learn: how to be in a relationship with God, how to listen to God, how to speak with God, what you should do that pleases God, what you should avoid that hurts God.

The Son knows what true beauty is because He has seen it. That, too, you will learn, all the very special and wonderful things that normal, old-creation ears just cannot hear or understand.

The Son knows what is good and right and just. Not what the world calls goodness and justice. And that, too, you will learn.

This is a marvelous school and it will go on for all eternity as we grow in God, children of a new creation, never to die, ever to live more fully.

And it starts now, right here. Do you believe it, or do you doubt?

Well, believe it. Because it's happening right here, in our midst, in the school of Christ, with the Lord still present even as He said He would be: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28.20).ⁱ

ⁱ For a fuller discussion of the implications of this understanding of the Christian mandate, see Robert Brow, *Go Make Learners: A New Model for Discipleship in the Church* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1981). See also his WWW site at <http://www.brow.on.ca/>